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ABSTRACT

According to Edith Hamilton, "The Bible is the only literature in the world up to our century which looks at women as human beings, no better and no worse than men. The Old Testament writers considered them just as impartially as they did men, free from prejudice and even from condescension." The Bible portrays Rebekah, Rahab, Deborah, Jael, Esther, and Judith and their contributions to the nation of Israel with faithfulness and extreme candor. These women are represented in the Old Testament as multidimensional human beings--self-reliant, resourceful, influential, and courageous--but at the same time capable of resorting to morally questionable means in order to accomplish their ends. This straightforward portrayal of women is due largely to the fact that the Hebrew mind was intrinsically realistic, which accounts for much of the directness and simplicity of the Old Testament narratives and also for the fact that the writers had a respect for self-determined and resourceful women. (LL)

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Women in the Literature of the Old Testament

Because the cry for women's liberation seems such a modern phenomenon, some people assume that the quest of the female sex for dignity and for equality in privilege and opportunity has proceeded out of a dark night of oppression in antiquity toward the daylight of modern enlightenment. As a corollary to this assumption, they suppose that ancient literature, the Old Testament for example, portrays women in a position clearly subservient to men. To what extent is this true? What kind of treatment do women receive at the hands of the authors of the Old Testament? One Bible commentator asserts that "Women do not have a prominent place in Old Testament writings. A number of them who enter into the stories are unnamed. Only when they did something unusual, either good or bad, are they mentioned. . . . The accounts were doubtless all written by men. Men tried to feel superior by keeping women 'in their place.'"[1] I think this assertion is wrong. I am much more inclined to agree with Edith Hamilton, who says "The Bible is the only literature in the world up to our own century which looks at women as human beings, no better and no worse than men. The Old Testament writers considered them just as impartially as they did men, free from prejudice and even from condescension."[2] There is a dispassionate accuracy in the Old Testament writers' treatment

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of women which is refreshing to anyone much acquainted with the remarkable ladies of the romancers and poets of other lands. What is refreshing is to see women portrayed neither as the lesser man nor as some kind of bright angelic visitant.

In what follows, I wish to survey briefly some of the important women of the Old Testament in an attempt to substantiate Edith Hamilton's thesis. Then, after delineating the general pattern of literary treatment of Hebrew womanhood, I will try to account for it.

Though the Old Testament is composed of diverse material written by many hands over a long period of time, it possesses striking elements of unity and continuity. The main thread of continuity, of course, is the coverant between God and man first made with Abraham and then reaffirmed with all the major patriarchs and prophets. The story of Creation and the early history of man is really presented as a prelude to the establishment of the Hebrews as a chosen people, through whom all nations of the earth will be blessed, and the prophecies of a Messiah are really simply a future hope for the fulfillment of that covenant initiated with Abraham. At some of the crucial turning points in this continuity of Hebrew history, the fate of the nation was determined by a resourceful woman. Rebekah, Jochebed (the mother of Moses), Rahab, Deborah, Jael, Bathsheba, Esther, and Judith are all examples of a recurring pattern in which a woman, generally with both beauty and "good understanding," takes decisive action to aid her people. Let us consider some examples from this list.

Rebekah attracts interest from the time she is introduced at

Nahor's well in Mesopotamia. Besides being very beautiful, she conveys the impression of being chaste, courteous, industrious, and trusting. In response to Abraham's servant's request for water, she immediately gives him a drink and then waters his ten camels, which was probably no small task. She is also quick to offer him hospitality. Arrangements for a marriage between Isaac and Rebekah are made as soon as Abraham's servant meets the girl's father, and despite the father's request that Rebekah remain at least ten more days at home, the servant insists on returning directly to Abraham. The father says, "Let us call the girl and see what she says."[3] Without hesitation, Rebekah says "Yes, I will go." Such willingness shows positive direction, along with considerable courage and spirit. Her simple statement takes on added significance when we consider the literary style of the early Old Testament writers. These authors use a minimum of adjectives. Their narratives are told with great simplicity, characterization being conveyed almost entirely by brief, but pointed dialogue. They expected the reader to use his imagination in fleshing out the bones of character and situation which they provided. Therefore, a line of dialogue in a book like Genesis is generally heavily weighted with implications for interpretation.

This same kind of self-reliance on Rebekah's part is demonstrated again later in the story when she engineers Jacob's usurpation of his brother Esau's paternal blessing. Without her instigation and planning, there would not have been a nation of Israel as we know it. She knows what she wants for her favorite son and is

resourceful and unflinching in obtaining it. When Jacob protests his mother's plan, fearing to receive a curse rather than a blessing, Rebekah says, "Let the curse fall on me, my son, but do as I say."

Numerous apologetic explanations have been provided to excuse the deception and theft practiced by Rebekah and her son, but they are not easy to explain away, even using the cultural context of the period. I view the incident as a typical example of the candor and realism of Old Testament literature. There is a certain charm in a portrayal of the beautiful and revered mother of Israel which includes her practical ingenuity applied in furthering the fortunes of a favorite son.

Rahab is another example of an admirable heroine who is presented very sympathetically, but is not whitewashed. It would have been a small matter for the author of her story to omit any reference to her profession; it certainly has no direct bearing on the events of the episode. Like the other women we are considering, she takes charge of the situation: acting decisively, she designs the plans and gives the directions. The Israelite spies who infiltrated Jericho must have been selected for their intelligence and ability, yet they submit rather passively to the instructions of this resourceful prostitute. Since one of these spies was Joshua, who later became the successor to Moses as leader of Israel, it would have been easy by other standards of writing history for the author to portray Rahab as a simple instrument of deliverance utilized by daring and competent heroes.

Among the narratives of the judges of Israel is the story of Deborah. Deborah is a judge, or in other words, a charismatic leader of the people to whom they go when decisions and judgments must be made. The fact that she is a woman is given no special mention by the author. When the Canaanites to the north threaten Israel, she sends for Barak and orders him, in the name of the Lord, to raise an army and defend the nation. There is no suggestion of romance or the use of feminine wiles; it is simply a case of a superior giving an assignment to a subordinate officer. Barak's answer is: "If you go with me, I will go; but if you will not go, neither will I." This hardly seems written to keep women in their place. What historian of any other nationality writing of a general's great victory, such as Barak's over "Sisera with his chariots and multitudes," would have set down such a statement? Deborah says, "Certainly I will go with you, but this venture will bring you no glory, because the Lord will leave Sisera to fall into the hands of a woman." She has the courage to go to battle and is nonchalant about the question of glory; she is simply concerned that the job gets done. We owe to her, according to Mary Ellen Chase, "the greatest single masterpiece of Hebrew poetry and one of the finest odes ever written in any language."[4]

Another woman shares with Deborah the honors of victory over Sisera; this is Jael, who drives a tent peg through his head. Consistent with the pattern we are surveying, Jael displays remarkable poise, Coolly and disarmingly, without revealing her intentions, she lures Sisera into a vulnerable position and then hammers the

peg into his temple. The account says, "His brains oozed out on the ground, his limbs twitched, and he died." But this is followed by no faintings nor hysterics as is so common in Hollywood versions of incidents in which a heroine steels herself and performs a necessary violent act. Instead, Jael goes out to meet Barak and says, "Come, I will show you the man you are looking for."

Esther is another example of a woman of beauty and good sense involved in a crucial political event, a crisis in the history of her people, who, prompted by patriotic zeal, is brave and resourceful in bringing about deliverance. Her uncle Mordecai informs her of Haman's plans for exterminating the Jews and pleads with her to entreat the king, her husband. This is not a simple thing for her to do, because she has not been called before the king for thirty days, and there is a firmly established law that if any person, man or woman, enters the king's presence in the inner court unbidden, that person will be put to death, unless the king stretches out to him the golden sceptre. Nevertheless, Esther says, "I will go to the king, although it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish." Even though it is Mordecai who prompts her to approach the king, from that point on, she devises and carries out her own plan.

Of course the most fully developed of these national heroines is Judith, whose story is told in the Apocrypha. The literary style of the post-exilic period is markedly different from that of the early period of Hebrew literature. The simplicity, economy,

and timeless quality of the narratives of the Pentateuch are replaced by a more elaborate and contrived style, resulting in a certain loss of ease and objectivity and strength. The contrast can readily be seen in comparing the long exhortations of Judith to the brief but telling dialogue put into the mouth of Rebekah. The writer of Judith leaves little to our imagination: Judith is "a very beautiful and attractive woman"; "No one spoke ill of her, for she was a very devout woman"; her townspeople recognize her "wisdom" and her "good sense and soundness of judgment." She is a woman of extraordinary self-possession. When her city is imperilled by the Assyrians, under the command of Holophernes, she calls the city officials to come to her and without a by-your-leave says, "Listen to me, magistrates of Bethulia, you had no right to speak as you did to the people today. . . ." After scolding and exhorting them soundly, she informs them that she is "going to do a deed which will be remembered among our people for generations." She will deliver Israel; "But do not try to find out my plan," she says, "I will not tell you until I have accomplished what I mean to do." Through an elaborate and skillfully executed scheme she does just what she promised to do and returns with the head of Holophernes.

It is not just the admirable women of the Old Testament who are portrayed with fairness and dignity; the less admirable are also plainly and realistically dealt with. Usually they are presented as "The strange woman which flattereth with her tongue" and "taketh hold of the youth void of understanding," and as the

quarrelsome, "A continual dropping on a very rainy day and a contentious woman are alike," but the criticisms are always reasonable and well founded and not simply distorted products of imaginations infected by male superiority.

What accounts for the literary treatment of women in the Old Testament, which treatment is in many ways unique in the literatures of the world? I think the answer lies in two main factors which were primary aspects of the Hebrew character and imagination. The first is the intense vitality of the race, both physical and spiritual. Mary Ellen Chase emphasizes this trait and says, "In spite of disasters sufficient to have shattered a people less hardy, in the midst of vicissitudes and tragedies of every sort, they seem literally never to have lacked inexhaustible powers of fortitude and of replenishment. They were vigorous and hardy in their physical make-up and unquenchably heroic in their spiritual. Their prodigal powers of endurance and of resiliency run throughout their literature."[5] The very fiber of their race was vigorous and robust, and this natural hardihood was constantly increased through the demands made upon it by the character of the land in which they lived. The Old Testament is filled with characters who display amazing strength and vitality, and obviously its authors love to depict them in these terms. The literary treatment of woman by these authors was largely governed by this factor. The men who wrote the Old Testament were responsive to feminine beauty and charm, of course, but they had a special respect for the vitality possessed by able, self-determined and resourceful women. The

modern Israeli sabra, who gets her name from the cactus which is tough outside and soft inside, is the latest avatar of the ideal Old Testament woman.

The second factor is that the Hebrew mind was intrinsically realistic. This fact accounts for much of the directness and strength, simplicity and charm of the familiar Old Testament narratives. The Hebrew storytellers treat their subjects with faithfulness and extreme candor. They record vices as well as virtues and give the impression of detachment on the one hand and intimacy on the other. Patriarchs, judges, prophets, kings and queens, as well as lesser men and women are uncompromisingly portrayed. Unlike the Greeks, for whom the world was beautiful and interesting and abstract knowledge was to be valued for itself, the Hebrews desired truth which had direct meaning in their lives--the truth about human nature, and this truth was not always beautiful. The Greeks sought to understand human nature and had a profound knowledge of it, but when they wrote of Antigone they showed her as wholly noble. They focused on the good because that was what was important in her, not the defects which as a human being she of course had. But the Hebrews were never able to ignore defects. This is why we get such balanced and unromanticized portraits of women in the Old Testament.

Perhaps all of this goes to suggest part of the reason for the Old Testament's remarkable staying power as literature. A faithful and essentially realistic portrayal of the fundamental life experiences of man generates interest which never pales. The

lady of medieval romance, the beloved of the Petrarchan sonneteer, the witty sophisticate of Restoration drama, the sentimental heroine of the eighteenth-century novel--all these enjoy a certain vogue, but eventually become uninteresting; but there is a perennial freshness and vitality about the women in the Old Testament which continues to intrigue us.

Notes

1. W. W. Sloan, A Survey of the Old Testament (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957), p. 126.

2. Spokesman for God (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962), p. 99.

3. My Bible quotations are primarily from The New English Bible.

4. The Bible and the Common Reader, revised ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 131.

5. Ibid., p. 87.